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Rising Off the Plateau in Learning Arabic

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Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for
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Acknowledgments: (optional)

Abstract

Experiencing plateaus in second language learning is a common experience, especially for language students studying Arabic or one of the other languages considered more difficult. Some of the causes for the plateau experience in Arabic are its complex grammar, its vast amount of vocabulary, and the different roles of Modern Standard Arabic and the spoken dialects of Arabic.

Rising off the Plateau in Studying Arabic is a thesis project, which analyzes this second language learner's attempt to make significant progress in studying Modern Standard Arabic. The project was based on a self-directed, semi-intensive Arabic language program, which prioritized the reading skill because of this learner's visual learning style. The importance of analyzing one's own second language acquisition process was emphasized throughout the project. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) were used as an evaluation tool to guide self-assessment of progress being made.

This thesis project was the final requirement for a M.A.T. (Masters of Arts in Teaching) degree from the School of International Training. The required classes of this program provided the knowledge, hope, and inspiration that enabled this project to be envisaged, planned, and completed. The Second Language Acquisition course played the most significant role in that process.

Appropriate ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) descriptors:

Arabic
Intensive Language Courses
Reading Comprehension
Reading Comprehension/Grammar
Reading Skills
Second Language Learning

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I have been studying Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) for over ten years with mixed results throughout that time period. My most common experience during my Arabic studies has been one of feeling discouraged and overwhelmed. I do concede that Arabic is categorized as one of the most difficult languages in the world. Yet at the same time, I have always felt that somehow there was a way for me to ascertain how to overcome the obstacles that were keeping me from learning the Arabic language well. I was not convinced that I needed to settle for the plateau that I had arrived at in my Arabic studies.

During my two summers of classes at the School for International Training (SIT), I became increasingly convinced that I could learn a second language well. I gained confidence, through many of my classes, that I could gather the necessary tools, knowledge, and skills to deal with the obstacles that were holding me back from my full potential as an LL2 (second language learner). I gained insights from my Four Skills class into the significance of studying the reading skill while learning a second language. I was also refreshed by all the insights I received while studying Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Those two classes, in particular, provided me with confidence and knowledge that I have applied to this research project. SIT equipped and enabled me to rise off the plateau and make significant progress in studying MSA, and this research project is the result of my efforts to practically apply much of the knowledge and theories, which I learned at SIT, to my studies of MSA.

CHAPTER ONE

MY HISTORY OF ARABIC STUDY

My Background

I grew up on a farm in Minnesota. I had very little exposure to second languages as a child and never even thought of studying one in high school. The first time I seriously began to contemplate learning a second language was around the age of 20, which was during the time when I met my wife-to-be, Kris. She had grown up in Japan and was finishing up a double language major, Japanese/Spanish, at the University of Minnesota. And yet, it was not until I was 28 years old that I began studying my first foreign language, at the University of Minnesota (U of MN). After studying Mandarin Chinese for two quarters, I decided to switch to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). I was just becoming interested in pursuing a degree in International Relations.

When Kris and I were considering marriage, we talked a lot about living abroad, which was something that Kris was eager to do. Based out of that desire, we ended up living in England for five and a half years, involved in a business venture with some friends. This experience changed me from a Minnesota boy, with a very limited perspective on the world and other people groups, into a member of the international community, with years of experience in one of the world's cosmopolitan cities. During this time, I had some interaction with Arabs. One such experience came while Kris and I were on a plane flying from London to Tokyo. The man sitting next to me on the plane was an Emirati, who was flying from London to Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. I enjoyed conversing with him during the trip, in English, as well as getting my first impression of the Middle East while our plane refueled in Dubai. It was an interesting

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experience that stirred my curiosity and caused me to begin to wonder about the Arab peoples, their countries, and their cultures.

A Friend of Arabs

When Kris and I returned to the States from London, I began pursuing a BA at the U of MN. Being back in Minnesota, I remembered some of the ideas and impressions about Arabs that I had grown up with. I realized that those perceptions, which I had grown up with, were not very friendly or sympathetic. As an American, I could not help ponder the strain we often experience, as a nation, with Arab nations. Soon I began to wonder if I could make a difference related to those concerns. Could I become someone who would be able to appreciate Arabs and see life as they do? Could I learn their language well enough to study about their culture, history, values, etc. the way they learn about it throughout their lives? And what about their music, I wondered? Could I grow to experience, appreciate, and love it, so that I could really enter into that aspect of their daily lives? And finally, could I go deep enough into Arabic to be able to laugh and joke with them and begin to enter into some of the camaraderie they experience as friends?

Soon I decided to try out this growing desire to become a friend of Arabs. I began by choosing to study MSA as the fulfillment for my language study requirement at the U of MN. I also began to take some classes about Arab society, history, culture, etc. which fulfilled some of the class requirements for my degree in International Relations. These experiences steadily strengthened and confirmed my growing desire to become a friend of Arabs.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)

MSA is the modern written language of the Arab speaking countries of the world. It is used as a written medium among the Arab countries as well as the spoken medium for news broadcasts, formal speeches, school instruction, and some Arab songs. In general, Arabs do not speak to each other using MSA outside of TV or radio media usage. If a foreigner or Arab from a different Arab country is being interviewed on television, both the interviewer and interviewee will speak MSA if they are both able to conduct the interview in that language. This seems to be a normal requirement for Arab journalists who interview foreigners for television or radio programs.

Dialectical Arabic

Spoken Arabic dialects vary greatly from country to country and sometimes even from city to city. If a foreigner studying Arabic wishes to communicate with Arabs of a certain country, it is more rewarding to study the local dialect than to try to speak with the local people using MSA. Although all Arabs who have graduated from high school have an advanced level of MSA, many Arabs will respond to a foreigner who is speaking to them using MSA by answering them with the local dialect. Otherwise, they will switch into English or French because they are more comfortable speaking in those languages than in MSA.

It is also noteworthy to point out that there are many differences between a local dialect and MSA. These include differences of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Therefore, illiterate Tunisians would have serious difficulties understanding MSA and using it as a means of communication, whether through writing or speaking.

Studying Arabic at the University of Minnesota

At the age of 28, I began pursuing a BA in International Relations, which required six quarters of a second language. My instructor was an Egyptian graduate student. I appreciated him as a person and as a very enthusiastic representative of Egypt, of Arab culture and history, and of Islam. The one drawback was that he was not a well-trained language instructor. This was a bit frustrating for us students. His supervisor, a Sudanese professor of Arabic, who was the head of the department, was a very good MSA instructor, but he was not interested in teaching lower-level Arabic classes. That was unfortunate because he was a well-qualified language instructor.

The textbooks that we used for my Arabic classes were titled *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic 1 & 2*, (Abboud and McCarus 1983), and were grammar-based. Since I had had little exposure to English grammar during my secondary education, I found the frequent use of metalanguage (grammatical, technical language) confusing and unhelpful. I was, mainly, able to concentrate on reading the passages and on answering the questions, using the appropriate sentences from the texts as the basis of my answers. This enabled me to gain a certain amount of confidence and security in dealing with the Arabic script, but did not help me to grasp the grammatical structures used in the texts.

Studying Arabic in Tunisia – The Bourguiba Language Institute

During the summer in between my two years of Arabic language study at the U of MN, I traveled to Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, to study 6 weeks of intensive MSA at the Bourguiba Language Institute. I hoped to gain some language credits through this summer of intensive language study and to fulfill my study-abroad requirement for my degree. The experience was rich with cultural learning and adventure, as well as,

disappointments and misunderstandings. The amount of Arabic I learned was minimal, and I was not able to receive any credit for my summer's studies towards my degree at the U of M. Even so, it was a valuable experience that introduced me to the country of Tunisia and its people. My time in Tunisia did adequately fulfill my degree requirement to have a cross-cultural experience abroad.

I was quite disappointed studying MSA at Bourguiba School (Bourguiba Language Institute). It is fair to say that my expectations were mismatched with Bourguiba School's curriculum. The summer program catered mainly to European young people who were looking for a fun summer vacation experience. Most of them came and chose a class level that was below their actual proficiency level in MSA. This allowed them to just travel around the country and vacation with their friends for six weeks while coming to class sporadically. This class dynamic made it more difficult for a student like myself, because that meant I was in a class with students whose levels were above mine. When one also includes the factor that some Arab teachers tend to pick on and humiliate the weaker students in a class, I did not appreciate the class dynamics or the lack of teacher support that I experienced at Bourguiba School that summer.

Bourguiba School – (4 years later)

When Kris, our son Philip, and I returned to Tunisia in 1993, I was eager to continue studying MSA, as well as the Tunisian dialect. I first tried Bourguiba School's year program but did not find the program or the teacher satisfactory. The class book, which was written by the head instructor, was based on some of the foundational convictions of the Direct Method. Translation was not allowed and the meaning of the

vocabulary and grammar was supposed to be figured out by the students while observing and using the L2 in class.

The head teacher was somewhat gifted but treated us adult students as if we were elementary school age, including the fact that at times she was verbally abusive. Personally, I did not like the Direct Method, because I felt like I was spending all of my time trying to figure out the meaning of the vocabulary and grammar. I tend also to be a perfectionist, so I found it difficult to memorize vocabulary without being sure of the meaning. To memorize a word and then to have to memorize it again, with a correction to my understanding of the meaning, just tired me out. In the end, I was eager to find a different school for my Arabic studies.

CITRAF

After studying at Bourguiba School, I enrolled at a private language school that allowed me to be in charge of my own program. I studied under three different instructors. Two of my instructors were university Arabic instructors and the third was a translator for the British Consulate. This experience was different for me because I enjoyed my three instructors, and I was able to tailor the program to meet my own needs.

A positive outcome of my time at CITRAF was that I made some good progress in Tunisian spoken Arabic. This was mainly due to the fact that I spent time with my teachers outside of the classroom. I spent time with them, for example, going to a café, jogging together, going to a wedding, or having a meal together with our families. I needed these kinds of opportunities, and those days were my first real experience of speaking the local dialect with my colleagues.

One major weakness of my program at CITRAF was that I did not have adequate course materials to provide me with meaningful vocabulary and grammar. My university Arabic instructors were both used to teaching Tunisian students. All of their explanations were in Arabic and I did not understand most of what they said. It was a slightly more positive experience of the Direct Method applied to my Arabic studies. This was because of my relationships with my professors. In conclusion, my time studying at CITRAF was a more productive language learning experience than my time at Bourguiba School. Even so, the amount of MSA that I learned was still fairly minimal.

A Linguaphone Arabic Course

In the summer of 1995 after living in Tunisia for two years, we visited England. While there, Kris and I decided to purchase a Linguaphone Arabic course. It is a course based on a combination of Audio-Lingual Method and Communicative Approach principles. Their motto is   LISTEN   UNDERSTAND   SPEAK. Nine cassettes provide audio input related to the dialogues, texts, and exercises. Five books provide an introduction to the Arabic script/pronunciation; transliterations of the dialogues and texts; dialogues and texts in Arabic script; exercises, and drills; and grammatical explanations in English. The course reminds me of the Audio-Lingual Method because of its emphasis on listening and repeating. Its emphasis of situational language and functional Arabic provides the connection to the principles of the Communicative Approach.

I have used the Linguaphone Course off and on over the past few years. Most of the time, I used the cassettes and dialogues to practice listening to MSA and for trying to memorize vocabulary in meaningful contexts. It has been a good resource because of all

the translated vocabulary and grammatical explanations in English, which accompany the dialogues, texts, and exercises. The listening aspect of the course has not proved to be as helpful as it could have been, since it was not produced using Tunisian Arabic pronunciation.

At SIT, I was convinced anew, concerning my learning style, that I am a visual learner. Therefore, it tends to be more efficient for me to prioritize reading and writing, over listening and speaking, while studying MSA. This is one reason why the Linguaphone course was not the most efficient way for me to study MSA. Even so, it did provide some needed translation of vocabulary as well as grammatical explanations in English. These textbooks were clearly more suited to my needs than the textbooks and materials of Bourguiba School and CITRAF.

SIT and Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

In many ways, my time at SIT provided a lot of answers that I had been searching for as an LL2. Many of them came through my SLA class as we studied the process of learning a second language. I gained support, from some of the SLA research that we studied, for some of the convictions that I had come to over the years about myself as an LL2. I also gained some new insights into my SLA process. Even though I had learned some Arabic in each of my previous experiences of studying it, I longed to come into my full potential as an LL2 of the Arabic language. My SLA class, as well as, many of my other classes at SIT, provided the knowledge, the guidance, and the expertise necessary to enable me to grow and pursue this desire as an LL2.

CHAPTER TWO

SLA CLASS INSIGHTS APPLIED TO ANALYSING MYSELF AS A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER

One benefit I received from my Second Language Acquisition class at SIT was the opportunity to think about my own SLA (second language acquisition) process, in light of what I was learning in class. This proved to be very stimulating and encouraging and resulted in my choosing to do this research project. The following are some of the key issues that apply to me as an LL2: the importance of motivation; being a visual learner vs. an aural learner; learning with or without a teacher/tutor; learning in the classroom vs. learning on the street; and the importance of learning strategies in SLA. Focusing on these areas has indeed proved beneficial and productive during this time of researching my study of MSA.

The Importance of Motivation

In their work titled *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research,* Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) draw together a clear analysis of some of the significant research pertaining to the role of motivation in SLA. They mention how, indebted to some of Mowrer's (1950) research, Gardner and Lambert (1972) developed two key concepts called: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) speak of *integrative motivation* as: "A learner is said to be integratively motivated when the learner wishes to identify with another ethnolinguistic group." They describe *instrumental motivation*: "in which the learner is motivated to learn an L2 for utilitarian purposes, such as furthering a career, improving social status or meeting an educational requirement" (p. 173). Personally, I have found both of these types of motivation important in my SLA process.

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First of all, I find that friendship and success in Arabic seem to go hand in hand. Without experiencing friendship, it is pretty hard to go very far in spoken Arabic. I supervised an exam with an Arabic professor recently. It was one of those enjoyable experiences of really hitting-it-off with someone. After the exam was finished, we went out for lunch together and then he invited me back to the Arabic department to just chat with him and his colleagues. All of the conversations were in Arabic and it was a very encouraging language learning experience. Having success in language in the midst of a growing friendship is a very satisfying and, in turn, motivating experience for me, these days.

Every time I experience a little more success in Arabic, whether in the local dialect or in MSA, I find myself enjoying my friends and their language more than before. I often joke with colleagues or Tunisians whom I have just met, and I tell them I am from El Kef (a Tunisian city close to the Algerian border). For some reason this often produces a round of laughter and joking that is just a fun experience. Humor is definitely an asset as I allow *integrative motivation* to create momentum for me as an LL2.

Secondly, this research project is a unique example of my taking advantage of *instrumental motivation* in learning Arabic. I chose to research my own SLA of MSA because I knew that I would be pressed to learn as much as possible within a given time period. Obtaining my MAT degree will be an important career advancement for me, and studying MSA for this research project links my educational requirements to my SLA process. Therefore, I reap the benefit of *instrumental motivation* when my *integrative motivation* begins to wane. It also helps to have my SLA of MSA linked to the pay increase I receive, as soon as I receive my MAT degree.

Integrative motivation and *instrumental motivation* provide examples of how I have been motivated to learn my L2 because of external stimuli and influences. My explanation of wanting to become "a friend of Arabs" (see Chapter One) dealt with some of the affective factors that influenced my desire to study MSA. Another source of motivation that has played an important role in my pursuit of MSA is the conative dimension. Snow, Corno, & Jackson (1996) define conation as "the tendency to take and maintain purposive action or direction toward goals" (1996, p. 264). A resolved volition and a firm will have been important to me throughout much of my life but especially in choosing an endeavor such as learning MSA. In deciding to pursue this language, and then in turn, in persevering within the process, my will to succeed has been one of my most important sources of motivation. It motivated me to consider the challenge and to decide to study MSA, and then it kept me actively pursuing fluency in my L2, even when other types of motivation waned. Many dimensions of motivation impacted my SLA process of MSA. Conation was a central one.

Visual Learner vs. Aural Learner

Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) refer to the research of Levin et al. (1974) and point out that many learners are bimodal when it comes to their preferred mode of presentation: visual or aural. "But for a sizeable minority, approximately 25 per cent of all learners, the mode of instruction clearly does influence their success as learners" (p. 196). I have found over the years that I learn considerably more when I am free to prioritize the visual mode of presentation. So, whether I am studying MSA or the local dialect, I need to be able to work with written script in order to comprehend, memorize, and begin to use the language I am working on. Therefore, confirmed by the research of

Levin et al. (1974) and others, I have included my preferred mode of instruction as a component of this research project.

Studying with or without a Teacher or Tutor

In all of my Arabic studies, my teacher's attitude towards me has been crucial. When the attitude was positive and supportive, I have been able to get more out of the learning situation. If the attitude was negative and cool, I gradually lost interest and motivation and began to look for an alternative class situation.

Personality wise, I do not handle a lot of negative criticism very gracefully, especially in an area where I do not naturally have an overwhelming amount of confidence. When studying Arabic, I need the maximum amount of support possible from my instructor. I agree with Tucker and Lambert (1973), that the attitude of the teacher is a very important affective factor (p. 179). My experience has taught me that unless Arab teachers have learned how to teach foreign students, they tend to teach them the same way they teach Arab students, which causes a lot of misunderstandings and anxiety buildup for the students.

A second issue, related to having a language instructor, is how to keep the language program on track and appropriate for my needs. In the past, my experience has been less than satisfactory in this regard. I would conclude that the main reason has been that the teachers were trained to teach Arabs and not foreigners, so the instruction and the curriculum were therefore incompatible with a foreigner studying MSA. These kinds of instructors are used to teaching students who are fluent in the local Arab dialect and are also partially fluent in MSA. It is very difficult for them, without appropriate training, to know how to make the language accessible to a foreigner.

When I initially met with Dr. Michael Gibson, my professional reader for this research project, one of the issues we discussed was whether or not I needed a tutor. He agreed with me that I could try considering the authors of my textbooks as my tutors. Dr. Gibson had also studied Arabic in Tunisia so he was familiar with the limitations I was concerned about, related to Arabic instructors.

So, with Dr. Gibson's support, I decided to let the authors of my textbooks be my instructors. I chose to focus my time on reading, vocabulary accumulation, grammar instruction, and controlled exercises, and I intentionally chose to ignore free exercises that require instructor supervision and feedback.

Learning in the Classroom vs. Learning on the Street

The role of the cognitive factor in language learning is also a significant issue that I studied in my SLA class. I appreciated the research of Chapelle and Roberts (1986) on the cognitive variables Field Independence and Field Dependence. They describe an FI person and an FD person as follows:

> The analytical FI type should be good at language *learning*, i.e., learning rules, finding patterns, and organizing to make generalizations. The FD person, on the other hand, may be better at L2 *acquisition*, i.e., acquiring the language through integrative language use such as interaction with native speakers in social situations. (p. 29).

I also agreed with their final conclusion, that language learners are best off if they can experience both FI and FD.

I would describe myself as being both FD and FI. I do better initially, studying the local dialect outside of the classroom, using the language on the street, or spending time with friends. This is true especially during the beginner to intermediate stage. Once I reach the point where I have to rework some of the grammar, then it is quite necessary to be back in the classroom with a grammar book. If I have trouble accessing grammar

help in English, then it is easy to lose momentum at this point, related to both the FI and FD variables. The longer I go without finding solutions the more apt I am to plateau, which is partially because of increasing negative comments I get from the people I spend time with on the street. This naturally discourages me and takes away from my desire to spend time using the FD variable to my advantage. Therefore, it is crucial for me to spend time as a FI learner analyzing and finding solutions for my grammatically weak areas, so that I can then spend more time as a FD learner testing out my learning with people in social situations.

In studying MSA, which is a FI variable situation, I ideally need the support of good materials and a well-trained instructor. If I lack either of these, it is difficult to keep my motivation up in a classroom. Because of the uniqueness of MSA not being a spoken language, it is very impractical to study it using the FD variable.

One benefit I received from studying the FI and FD cognitive variables, is that now I am alert to how they benefit an LL2. This encourages me to analyze how I am studying my L2 and encourages me to reflect on how I can reinforce the ways I naturally include both variables in my SLA process.

Learner Strategies

Studying about learner strategies was equally stimulating, in that I was reminded of many ways that I naturally use strategies to "to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, or use of information" (Wendon and Rubin, 1987). I was also challenged by many strategies that I do not use naturally but could adapt to my own learning style without too much effort. O'Malley et al. (1985a) provide a very helpful table of learning

strategy definitions. I will include below, from their table, two examples of strategies I use naturally and two that I need to acquire.

Strategies that are naturally a part of my SLA process

Directed attention	Deciding in advance to attend in general to a learning task and to ignore irrelevant distractors.
Transfer	Using previously acquired linguistic and/or conceptual knowledge to facilitate a new language learning task.

(Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, pp. 201-203).

Strategies I need to intentionally acquire

Advance Preparation	Planning for and rehearsing linguistic components necessary to carry out an upcoming language task.
Recombination	Constructing a meaningful sentence or larger language sequence by combining known elements in a new way.

(Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, pp. 201-203).

SLA Contributions

I am quite aware, as I write this chapter, that it is to my advantage to revisit the resource materials that I studied in my SLA class. It is refreshing and stimulating to take another look at myself as an LL2 and my SLA process by means of many of the chapters and articles I studied in class. It is true that one learns in cycles, and therefore, it is beneficial to revisit lesson material in order to continue to learn and get the full benefit from much of the quality resources that are available.

CHAPTER THREE

THE READING SKILL – WHY AND HOW I PRIORITIZED IT IN MY MSA STUDIES

My Four Skills class at SIT provided me with many new insights into the special role that the reading skill plays in SLA. Since I naturally prefer a visual presentation of language to an aural presentation, I decided to focus on reading MSA throughout this research project. Seeing the written script of MSA, while studying, aids me in both pronunciation and memorization. I have also become more aware of the importance of building a hypothesis to constantly test and adjust throughout the reading experience, which is an essential process common to both L1 and L2 readers. Finally, extensive reading, intensive reading, skimming, and scanning are some of the basic reading strategies and techniques that I naturally use when reading in my L1, which I must be sure to transfer to reading MSA.

In chapter one, I pointed out that MSA is not usually used as a spoken language. Although it is used for formal speeches, some television broadcasts and movies, some radio programming, and some Arabic songs, Arabs rarely speak to each other or to foreigners in MSA. MSA is mainly used as a written medium. Therefore, many foreigners who study MSA find concentrating on the reading skill more productive. This is especially true for me, because I am a visual learner.

Why Reading? A Reading Skill Focus for a Visual Learner

Because I learn more efficiently when I am able to connect meaning to written script, I have chosen to focus this research project on the reading skill while studying MSA. More times than not throughout my years of studying MSA or an Arabic dialect, instructors and friends have encouraged me to focus on the spoken skill. Having taken

much of this advice seriously, I have found over the years that listening and speaking are not as important for me as focusing on the Arabic script. My main priority is working with the L2 visually. When I approach SLA with this focus it strongly enhances my ability to build vocabulary, grasp the pronunciation of the L2, begin to hypothesize about the language's grammatical structures, etc.

Pronouncing and Memorizing MSA

I have a perfectionist nature that makes it difficult for me to confidently memorize and use Arabic vocabulary until I have seen it spelled out in Arabic script. One reason for this is because Arabic has two *H* sounds and two *K* sounds. My perfectionist nature causes me to want to memorize a word correctly the first time, rather than having to change my pronunciation to the other *K* or *H* sound, after having memorized it incorrectly.

Another factor related to memorizing is what I have already mentioned concerning my need to see language visually. When I see an Arabic word in Arabic script, immediately I start to analyze it to see if I can identify its root and the word's grammatical form. This is aided significantly by being able to see the script and know the exact spelling of the word. Without the script, I am much less certain regarding the grammatical form and meaning of the word.

Based on Research – What is Significant about the Reading Skill?

Grabe (1991) referring to the research of cf. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, (1985); Grabe, (1988b); Hall, White, and Guthrie, (1986); Smith, (1982) presents a clear and concise summary of the research findings, concerning the reading skill possessed by fluent L1 readers:

Research has argued that fluent reading is *rapid*; the reader needs to maintain the flow of information at a sufficient rate to make connections and references vital to comprehension. Reading is *purposeful*; the reader has a purpose for reading, whether it is for entertainment, information, research, and so on. Reading for a purpose provides motivation-an important aspect of being a good reader. Reading is *interactive*; the reader makes use of information from his/her background knowledge as well as information from the printed page. Reading is also interactive in the sense that many skills work together simultaneously in the process. Reading is *comprehending*; the reader typically expects to understand what s/he is reading. Unlike many ESL students, the fluent reader does not begin to read wondering whether or not s/he will understand the text. Reading is *flexible*; the reader employs a range of strategies to read efficiently. These strategies include adjusting the reading speed, skimming ahead, considering titles, headings, pictures and text structure information, anticipating information to come, and so on. Finally, reading *develops gradually*; the reader does not become fluent suddenly, or immediately following a reading development course. Rather, fluent reading is the product of long-term effort and gradual improvement. (Grabe 1991, 378-379)

Being exposed to this type of research about reading helped me conceptualize what it is

that makes up a fluent L1 reader. It also increased my motivation to prioritize the reading

skill in my SLA studies.

How to Prioritize Reading: Focusing on some Main Ways of Reading in an L2

Grellet (1981) summarizes some of the main ways that L1 readers read:

- Skimming: quickly running one's eyes over a text to get the gist of it.
- Scanning: quickly going through a text to find a particular piece of information.
- Extensive reading: reading longer texts, usually for one's own pleasure. This is a fluency activity, mainly involving global understanding.
- Intensive reading: reading shorter texts, to extract specific information. This is more an accuracy activity involving reading for detail. (p. 4)

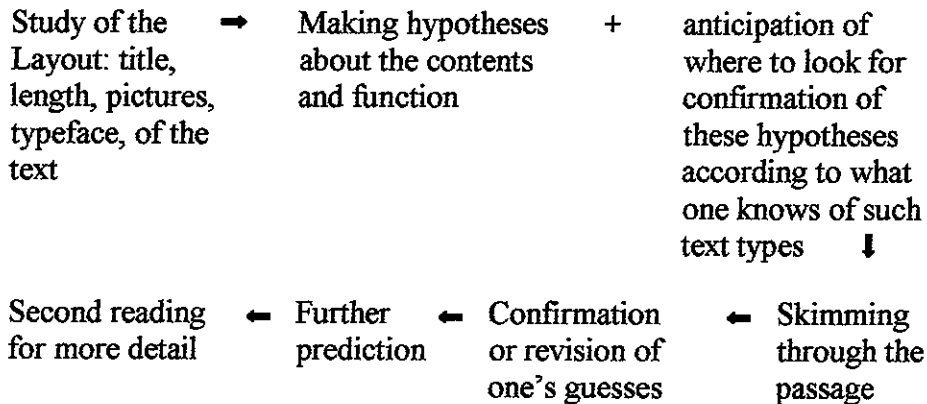These techniques and strategies are second nature in one's L1, yet, I have found that in

my L2 it is easy to get lost in the process, and to lose some of the mechanics that are

natural to my L1. Grellet's (1981) article aided me in thinking theoretically about what I

do naturally in my L1. This provided me with some priorities concerning how to go

about concentrating on the reading skill in my SLA process.

The Priority of Guessing

Grellet (1981) also summarizes the importance of guessing when reading:

> Reading is a constant process of guessing, and what one brings to the text is often more important than what one finds in it. This is why, from the very beginning, the students should be taught to use what they know to understand unknown elements, whether these are ideas or simple words. This is best achieved through a global approach to the text.

One could sum up this kind of approach in the following way:

Study of the ➡ Layout: title, length, pictures, typeface, of the text	Making hypotheses + about the contents and function	anticipation of where to look for confirmation of these hypotheses according to what one knows of such text types ⬇
Second reading ⬅ for more detail	Further ⬅ Confirmation ⬅ prediction or revision of one's guesses	Skimming through the passage

(Grellet 1981, p. 7)

This process of making hypotheses and guessing as one reads is one that I have had to be quite intentional about in my SLA process. Each time I come back to the theory and think through the reasoning for each stage, I am challenged afresh to keep applying it to my L2 reading skill. I often find myself wondering, why a process that is so natural in my L1 can seem to evaporate when I need it most with my L2. I need to regularly come back to the theory to help remind me of which strategies and techniques are most appropriate for my SLA process.

Prioritizing the Reading Skill

My intent was to see if prioritizing the reading skill of MSA enabled me to lift off my plateau in Arabic studies. By starting with the receptive skill, reading, I hoped in turn

to lift grammar and the other three skills off the plateau as well. I have found that trying to concentrate on all four skills and grammar, at the same time, dissipates my efforts so that I end up back on the same plateau. I appreciate the integrated approach, but with MSA it seems to me too much to accomplish at the same time. Prioritizing the reading skill is an alternative, which allows me to press on with one skill, as far as possible, before coming back to work on the other skills. But does it work? I will answer that question in chapter ten, My Conclusions.

CHAPTER FOUR

GRAMMAR ISSUES – HOW THEY RELATE TO ME AS AN LL2

My Structures class and Applied Linguistics class at SIT provided me with a lot of English grammar learning opportunities and growing confidence in dealing with grammar as a teacher and an LL2. This provided me with the ability to overcome the detrimental effects of grammar anxiety as well as my perfectionist nature, which demands that I understand everything well. My Structures and Applied Linguistics classes also provided me with a growing familiarity with the metalanguage of English grammar. And finally, the grammatical role of semantics (meaning) became clear to me, as I studied how the meaning of lexical items work together with the grammatical structural meaning to produce the complete meaning of the sentence.

Perfectionist Nature and Grammar Anxiety

Because of my perfectionist nature it is difficult for me to be confident if I do not understand something well. Therefore, in teaching English and as an LL2, I easily lost momentum and confidence through a lack of grammatical understanding. There seems to be a minimum level of English grammar awareness that is required before one is able to work confidently as an English teacher or LL2. It is likely that this level is higher for us who have perfectionist personalities.

At times, I have tried to study English grammar on my own with a book. Yet, what I really needed was the structure and *instrumental motivation* of a class, instructor, and degree program. This was the only cure for my grammar anxiety. That is what my Structures and Applied Linguistics classes at SIT provided for me. They enabled me to

do what I had not been able to accomplish on my own, i.e., gain control of my grammar anxiety by building my confidence in working with English grammar.

Grammar and its Metalanguage

When I first started studying MSA at the University of Minnesota, the textbook that we used was grammar based. I found it very difficult to understand because of the in-depth use of grammar and its metalanguage. I would have benefited from an English grammar class or two, back then, so that I could have learned more from that Arabic textbook. My linguistic classes at SIT helped me solidify a sound understanding of English grammar and its metalanguage, which was an appropriate preparation for my MSA studies for this research project.

Meaningful Language

In my SLA and Applied Linguistics classes at SIT, I became aware of the importance of meaning in SLA. It became very clear to me that until I am able to attach meaning to a word/phrase it is just noise or script. I have spent years hearing a lot of meaningless noise and seeing just as much meaningless script. When I watched television programs in MSA I mainly heard noise. For years I continued to do that, assuming that eventually it would all become meaningful language. It was the same when I tried to read a newspaper. It was mostly meaningless script. At SIT, I was challenged that I have to discover the meaning of the noise and meaningless script or it will just remain meaningless. I appreciated this basic awareness, because it shook me out of a mode of passive waiting and urged me to be constantly pursing meaning in my L2. But how does one actively pursue meaning as an LL2?

Lexical Meaning

Through my Structures class I studied English lexicon and the importance that some linguists place on ESL students studying and memorizing lexical items systematically. I appreciate this emphasis and the different strategies used to aid the memorization process of large amounts of vocabulary. These are to be appreciated, especially with a language like MSA, which has a vast lexicon.

I have often thought of lexical items as being the chief source of meaning in language. It is true that lexical items are important sources of meaning. Yet they work with the grammatical structure in order to create the meaning of the discourse. Both the lexical items and the grammatical structure are necessary to create meaning. In my Applied Linguistics class, I learned about the role that grammatical structure has in creating meaning.

Form, Meaning, and Use

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) have developed a three-piece pie chart, which contains three grammatical dimensions:

1. (morpho)syntax (FORM) – How is it formed? (Accuracy)

2. semantics (MEANING) – What does it mean? (Meaningfulness)

3. pragmatics (USE) – When/why is it used? (Appropriateness) (p. 4)

They stress the importance of not just teaching students the grammatical forms of the target language:

> Since grammar does not deal simply with form, language teachers cannot be content with having students achieve a certain degree of formal accuracy. Language teachers must also help their students to use the structures meaningfully and appropriately as well. Thus, the three dimensions of form, meaning, and use make explicit the need for students to learn to use grammar structures *accurately, meaningfully,* and *appropriately.* (p. 5)

I found the emphasis of these three dimensions of grammar, helpful in thinking about MSA grammar. It reminded me that meaning is not only lexical but is also structurally based. Therefore, I have to pay close attention to Arabic grammar in order to get the full meaning of a text. It is not just a matter of memorizing all of the lexical items and understanding all of their variants. It is equally important, to understand the grammatical structure of the discourse.

I need to keep form, meaning, and use in mind as I study MSA. It is easy for me to just focus on memorizing Arabic verb forms or the meaning of lexical items. Instead, I need to widen my thinking to often include all three of these dimensions. This is the type of learning strategy that I need to develop within my study habits.

Getting a hold on Grammar and its Role

My classes at SIT deepened my understanding of grammar and its role in teaching language and in my SLA process. They helped me gain confidence with English grammar and in studying grammar as an LL2. I now have a growing familiarity with much of the metalanguage of English grammar. It has also been very helpful to identify the important role that grammatical structure plays, along with lexicon, in creating meaning. And lastly, the grammatical dimensions, *form, meaning,* and *use*, provide me with a helpful framework for pursuing the full meaning of a text while studying MSA.

CHAPTER FIVE

ASSESSING MY LEVEL IN READING MSA

Level assessment was my first priority at the beginning of this thesis project. I dealt with this need in two ways. First, I went to the Arabic department of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis campus, and made an appointment for a level assessment exam with Professor Hisham Khalek. Secondly, after our return to Sfax and before I began my MSA study program, Kris and I assessed my level of reading MSA using the ACTFL Scales (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines). During my initial meeting with my professional reader, Dr. Michael Gibson, we decided that I would benefit from intermittent reading comprehension exams throughout my MSA study program, to assess my progress in reading MSA. This resulted in my taking five assessment exams throughout my study program.

Professor Hisham Khalek's Exam

Professor Khalek's exam was a two-part exam. The first part was a short informal letter followed by comprehension questions. The second part was a one-page text about Tunisia followed again by comprehension questions. He initially told me I had a 30-minute time limit, but then in the end, he just let me have as much time as I needed, and I used one and a half hours to complete it. My overall impression when I began the exam was that I was not going to do very well. But after I had finished taking it, I was quite surprised and encouraged by how well I had done.

The content of the first half of the exam was an informal letter from a young woman to her friend. In it, she described how discontent she was concerning her lack of personal freedom. Her parents basically required her to spend her free time at home,

whereas she would have preferred to spend it out having fun with friends. It was three paragraphs in length, and I would describe it as an intermediate level text. The comprehension questions were multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions. It reminded me of exams I had taken before at the U of MN, with a format that was familiar to me.

The second half of the exam was three columns of text interspersed with illustrations. It described Tunisia, its natural beauty, its weather, its people, its economy, etc. It was less difficult for me because of all the schemata (background knowledge) I naturally have from living in Tunisia. The exam questions were similar to those of the informal letter section.

Professor Khalek's Assessment

Professor Khalek sent me an e-mail message at the end of September with the results of his assessment of my exam. He had placed me at the intermediate level in reading MSA. He said that I had answered all of the questions correctly, but I had made some spelling mistakes. He said that he would have to give me another exam and set a time limit on it, in order, to tell if I was at the intermediate-high or advanced level.

After reading his assessment of my level, I realized there are different definitions of what determines a person's level in reading MSA. His assessment of my level was much higher than I had expected. I talked this over with Dr. Gibson when I spoke with him, and he agreed, but did not seem to mind. His only concern was that the same person do both the initial and the final assessment and that s/he use the same criteria.

In analyzing Professor Khalek's assessment I had these thoughts. It is unlikely that he was using the ACTFL Scales (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign

Languages – Proficiency Guidelines) or any other standardized assessment tool. More likely, he used a general impression grade, which is common for placement tests in some university language departments. He was also, most likely comparing me with other American university students studying MSA to meet a language requirement, for some sort of degree program. This type of assessment was helpful, because it allowed me to see where I fit in alongside other Americans studying Arabic at the university level. And yet, it did not provide the same type of assessment, as does a tool like the ACTFL Scales.

Level Assessment Using the ACTFL Scales

When we arrived back in Sfax in the middle of September, Kris and I used the ACTFL Scales to assess my level in MSA. After reading through them carefully and thinking about the reading abilities that each level represents, we decided to place me at the novice-high level. The following is the ACTFL description of the novice-high reading level:

> Has sufficient control of the writing system to interpret written language in areas of practical need. Where vocabulary has been learned, can read for instructional and directional purposes standardized messages, phrases or expressions, such as some items on menus, schedules, timetables, maps, and signs. At times, but not on a consistent basis, the Novice-High level reader may be able to derive meaning from material at a slightly higher level where context and/ or extralinguistic background knowledge are supportive. (p. 5)

We placed me at this level because I had not seriously studied MSA for several years and I had never really focused my studies on the reading skill. Although the tasks and language, described for the novice-high reader, seem simple and basic, in MSA, the vocabulary used for some of these tasks is often uncommon, and the grammar is frequently quite difficult. There is often a big difference between the graded texts used in Arabic textbooks and the authentic texts one deals with in everyday situations. Just

because the tasks seem simple does not mean that the required vocabulary and grammar

of MSA are as well.

Our alternative was to place me at the intermediate-low level. Following, is the

ACTFL Scales' description of the intermediate-low reading level:

> Able to understand main ideas and /or some facts from the simplest connected texts dealing with basic personal and social needs. Such texts are linguistically noncomplex and have a clear underlying internal structure, for example chronological sequencing. They impart basic information about which the reader has to make only minimal suppositions or to which the reader brings personal interest and/or knowledge. Examples include messages with social purposes or information for the widest possible audience, such as public announcements and short, straightforward instructions dealing with public life. Some misunderstandings will occur. (ACTFL Inc. 1989, pp. 5-6)

The reason we chose not to place me at the intermediate-low level was because I was not

at all comfortable reading "messages with social purposes or information for the widest

possible audience, such as public announcements and short, straightforward instructions

dealing with public life." (ACTFL, Inc. 1989, p. 6) These types of reading tasks were

usually beyond my level in reading MSA, again, because of the vast choice of vocabulary

available in Arabic and the fact that it is not as easy to guess the meanings of words as it

would be with Romance languages.

We found it quite difficult working with the ACTFL Scales as a means to assess

the reading skill of MSA. Not that there is anything wrong with the Scales, rather, MSA

has peculiarities that make it very hard to assess appropriately. The main reason is that it

is hard to find authentic texts at the different levels of reading proficiency. This is

especially true for foreign adults studying MSA. There is children's literature, which

includes famous stories, fairy tales, etc. Yet, this type of text often has very difficult and

unusual vocabulary. This type of lexicon may be well known to the local children but it is not readily accessible to a foreign adult.

Intermittent Reading Comprehension Exams

During our initial meeting Dr. Gibson recommended that I regularly exam myself throughout my MSA study program. We decided on the following guidelines:

1. use an international Arabic magazine since the print is easy to read; the reader is aided by pictures and captions; there are international news stories which may allow for some appropriate schemata
2. choose an article of consistently similar level and difficulty for each exam
3. use the same magazine, but a different issue, each time
4. one hour exam period
5. this is meant to be a general comprehension check

The purpose of these exams was to account for learning progress, throughout my study program, that I was making in reading MSA.

Assessing My Reading Level

I am grateful that I ended up with two different types of reading level assessments for this research project. Professor Khalek's exam enabled me to see how my level compares with other American Arabic students. Using the ACTFL Scales to assess MSA was a good learning experience for Kris and me, and it provided an evaluation tool with different level descriptions than those used by Professor Khalek. I found that this widened the assessment process and provided two different perspectives on evaluating the same language skill. Dr. Gibson's suggestion to include intermittent comprehension exams, throughout my study program, also strengthened my research project with regular attempts to collect data on my progress in reading MSA. This type of comprehension check complemented the initial and final level assessment exams.

CHAPTER SIX

RESOURCES AND RECORDING DATA

Two important aspects of this research project were appropriate MSA textbooks and an adequate means of recording data. I have been quite dissatisfied, over the years, trying to study MSA using textbooks that have no English instructions or Arabic/English translations. The ones I chose for this study program have all been produced in the 90's, with up-to-date approaches and methodologies and with the language of instruction being English. I used five MSA textbooks; four of them were part of a series out of Ohio State University; the last one was Part II in a two part series, published by Georgetown University Press. For the data recording, I recorded my observations, questions, comments, insights, etc. in the notebook(s) I used for my written exercises. I recorded my comments, using red pen, next to the appropriate exercise or unit.

The Ohio State University Series

I first came upon a sample of this series, in the SIT resource center, while searching for appropriate MSA textbooks for my study program. Later, while driving through Ohio on our way to visit relatives, we decided to stop at the Ohio State University to see which MSA textbooks were available. I decided to buy a series of four textbooks, all of them written by the same author. The author's name is M. Mahdi Alosh, and the series is called *Ahlan wa Sahlan* at the elementary level and *Our Living Language* at the intermediate level.

These textbooks are each categorized as a *Student Manual for Individualized Instruction* and include listening exercises accompanied by a cassette tape. Because of my focus on the reading skill, I did not purchase the cassette tapes nor did I do the

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listening exercises. The elementary level textbooks were titled *Elementary 2, Ahlan wa Sahlan, part 2* and *Elementary 3, Ahlan wa Sahlan* (Alosh 1990, 1992) the second and third books in a series of three elementary level books. The intermediate level textbooks were titled *Intermediate Arabic 1, "Our Living Language", Part 1*, and *Intermediate Arabic 2, "Our Living Language", Part 2.* (Alosh 1992, 1992)

I chose to start with the elementary level to serve as a means of reviewing and consolidating my basic MSA vocabulary and grammar. The elementary level textbooks also provided plenty of low-level reading texts, designed for the elementary level reader. The intermediate-level textbooks continued on in a similar fashion. The reading exercises were made accessible by using graded reading texts, which were created by the author and appropriate for the intermediate level. At the very end of the second intermediate level textbook, the author began to introduce exercises based on simple authentic texts.

I chose M. Mahdi Alosh's series because of all the graded reading material and the ongoing process of revisiting and expanding on the vocabulary from lesson to lesson. I appreciated that he did not concentrate heavily on grammar but rather included it, as was necessary, according to the needs of the reading texts. The textbooks were also attractive to me because they were designed for American students studying MSA. The subject matter and vocabulary of the texts were fairly interesting to me, in contrast to my trying to use Tunisian MSA readers that were designed with Tunisian children in mind.

The Georgetown University Press Textbook

Georgetown University Press published this textbook in 1997, its title is *A Textbook for Arabic, Part Two* (Brustad et al. 1997) and its authors are Kristen Brustad,

Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Abbas Al-Tonsi. It was produced with much assistance and support from the Language Schools of Middlebury College and their staff. I chose this textbook because authentic texts are used to teach intermediate level students. The book also uses audiocassettes and videocassettes for working with the listening skill and both aural and visual learning. I chose not to purchase them and ignored those types of exercises while I concentrated on the reading skill exercises. With its emphasis on authentic texts, this textbook starts where M. Mahdi Alosh's series left off.

This textbook goes quite deep into grammar as it works with authentic texts. I realized at this point that a better understanding of grammar is in fact necessary for deeper comprehension of the increased complexity of the authentic texts. This led me to spend more time on grammar in this book than I had in the previous series. Despite the fact that grammar plays a strategic role in this textbook, it is restricted by the fact that this textbook prioritizes a communicative, integrated (four skills) approach. The role of grammar is important, but it does not take on the dominant emphasis of the book. Reading authentic texts is clearly the outstanding theme of this textbook. Within it, there was a substantial increase in the volume of readings, in contrast to the previous series.

Record Keeping

My record keeping strategy was to record my observations, insights, comments, and questions into my exercise notebook(s). I recorded them in red ink so that they would be easy to locate throughout the notebook, and I recorded them in the exercise notebook(s) so that the context of my comments would be clear. If my thoughts were related to a specific exercise, I would write them down at the end of the exercise or even in the midst of the exercise. This may appear untidy to some, but for me the efficiency of

being able to link my comments to their source, to what caused the learning, was more important than neat notes.

I recorded my comments daily and weekly. Sometimes I wrote several pages of observations and sometimes a few sentences. The weekly comments tended to be more global, a type of summary of my overall learning for the week. The daily comments tended to be more detailed, linked to specific exercises, grammar points, or texts. I also kept a record of how many hours I studied per day and per week.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MY YEAR OF STUDY

My MSA study program was a year full of building hypotheses and adjusting them, as well as, trying out much of what I had learned at SIT. It was an up and down experience, which energized me a lot at times and at other times demanded more and more time and energy from me. The submersion experience of going through a semi-intensive language study program was demanding and very rewarding. It created momentum for my learning like I have never experienced before in studying MSA.

The Timeline of the Year

My MSA study program started on the 17th of September and ended on the 29th of May, which was approximately 8 months of semi-intensive MSA study. I averaged 20 hours of study per week, sometimes going as high as 36 hours and sometimes dropping as low as 1 1/2 hours, because of work responsibilities. I finished the first book (14 units) on October 9th, the second book (6 longer units) on November 12th, the third book (5 long units) on January 11th, the fourth book (8 units) on March 11th, and the final book (10 very long and deep units) on May 29th.

As I read through my notes, I notice a clear trend that happened throughout my year of study. During the fall and into December, I was doing well and enjoying the learning process considerably. I was writing down a lot of interesting comments related to my learning and to what I had studied at SIT that summer. The hours I was putting in on Arabic were consistently between 20 and 25 hours per week, and I was enjoying the learning process.

In the last half of December and throughout January, I was not able to put in good consistent study time on MSA, and towards the end of January, I got sick with a serious case of bronchitis for 5 to 6 weeks. Throughout February, even when I was not busy supervising or grading exams at the University, I was too weak to study very much. From the end of December through February, I was fairly discouraged about my lack of serious MSA study time.

When I was able to seriously get back to my study program, I had to really pick up the pace to finish the last 2 books by June. During this period, I would describe my experience as quite business-like, neither enthusiastic nor discouraged. I was not recording many creative observations or comments in my notes, rather I was studying 25 to 35 hours per week, and with productive study time being the constant priority. I was always being stretched to the maximum by the demands of the authentic texts, the vast amounts of vocabulary, and the depth of the grammar required by the final textbook (Brustad et al. 1997). I was learning a lot; yet, the process was constantly consuming me. *Instrumental motivation* was clearly involved in keeping me going during this time.

Memorization Techniques

During a visit with a friend of mine, Dr. Ivan Lowe, he mentioned to me some thoughts he had about the significance of memorizing vocabulary systematically and effectively. I was challenged by his thoughts and began to experiment on my own to try to discover how to improve my methods for memorizing vocabulary. I tried working with a timer, giving myself 20 minutes to memorize a page of 20 words. Then, I would continue on the same way for two more pages of vocabulary, 20 minutes per page, and finally, I would take 30 minutes to review the 3 pages of vocabulary. Sometimes this

worked well for me and sometimes it was too intense. My favorite method was to spend quality time on the vocabulary the first day I studied that chapter, but not an excessive amount. Quality time included referring to the dictionary to try to make a new word more meaningful, by studying its root and related vocabulary. Then, on each of the following days, that I studied that unit, I quickly reviewed the vocabulary of the unit before doing anything else. This method was my favorite of the ones I used during my study program.

An MSA Verb Conjugation Book

Throughout the study year, I used an MSA verb conjugation book. This book helps a student look up a specific verb form, identify its verbal noun form, as well as, its active and passive particle forms. It enables one to check on the conjugation of each verb form, in each person, and for all of the tenses: perfect, indicative, subjunctive, jussive, and imperative. I had always been intimidated by it because it is in Arabic only, with all of the explanations and metalanguage in Arabic. Yet, since it was the only one I owned, I did not have any other option but to use it with my lessons. It did not take long and I was becoming more and more comfortable with it and with the MSA metalanguage used in books like that. This was a source of encouragement for me, throughout the year, as I am no longer mystified by this helpful resource.

The MSA Dictionary

A major challenge in studying MSA is using the dictionary. The majority of the vocabulary items one studies are easy to locate in the dictionary. Yet, a sizeable minority are derived from "hollow" or "defective" roots; roots that have a vowel as the middle, or final character. Attempting to find a word derived from one of these types of roots can be

very difficult, until one becomes familiar with the "hollow" and "defective" roots. Generally, these forms are not taught until well into the intermediate level, because one needs a good foundation in the basics of MSA grammar in order to deal with the forms of the "hollow" and "defective" roots. Throughout my study program this year, I had consistent opportunities to study and work with vocabulary derived from these types of roots. Therefore, now I am quite comfortable and able to efficiently find nearly all vocabulary items, (I still get stumped occasionally), which I need to look up in the dictionary. This, by itself, is a big confidence builder for me as a student of MSA.

My Unit Study Process

The way I studied a unit varied throughout the year. During my time studying Alosh's series, I began by trying to apply some of the strategies and techniques that I had learned in my Four Skills class at SIT. I started by glancing through the unit to get a sense of what it was covering. I practiced extensive reading and intensive reading whenever they were appropriate. I tried to remember to use some of the reading techniques such as skimming and scanning.

After a while, I became convinced that I should prioritize memorizing the vocabulary thoroughly before working on any of the exercises or texts. This was the time period when I was quite focused on vocabulary memorization, which was while I was studying my third and fourth book.

When I reached my fifth book, I began to change my unit study process some more. I shifted back towards my original position with vocabulary memorization being one of several priorities, including a fresh emphasis on grammar. I tried to review vocabulary, as well as grammar, daily or whenever necessary. I focused on the whole

unit as a process that I tried to grasp globally and in detail. I continued to try to prioritize the reading skill emphasis, as well as, vocabulary memorization and the grammar within the unit.

Momentum

An experience that I had throughout the year was one of growing momentum in my learning as I passed the 10-15 hours of study time and moved into the 15-25 hours of study time, per week. The weeks, in which I was only able to study 5-10 hours were an experience that demanded perseverance from me but did not give me back any significant momentum in my learning. They demanded that I spend nearly all the available time reviewing vocabulary, grammar, etc. After finishing the reviewing process, I had little time left with which to move on and apply my learning to the rest of the texts and exercises of the unit. The weeks, in which I had 15-25 hours of study time, provided me with the amount of time required to progress through the exercises and texts, having had sufficient time to review the vocabulary and grammar. I realized over and over that experiencing weekly momentum was essential to my learning MSA well.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RESULTS OF SELF-ADMINISTERED EXAMS

Throughout my study program, I was hoping to reach the intermediate-high level in reading MSA, which from my perspective is what the textbook of Brustad, Al-Batal, and Al-Tonsi, is aiming to accomplish for the students that study it. I have appreciated how the authors of that textbook describe that level. Their description has given me a secure point of reference to come back to throughout my study program.

Assessing my level in reading MSA has been a learning process. I used the ACTFL Scales as an assessment tool to guide my initial and final assessments. I used some articles from *Al Ahram Al Arabi* (an Egyptian Arabic magazine) for the intermittent comprehension exams. The procedures for those exams were not always as tidy as one would hope for, yet I learned a lot through the process.

My Interpretation of the Intermediate-High Level

Brustad, Al-Batal, and Al-Tonsi (1997) describe their objective for students studying their second textbook: "Students completing Part Two should reach the threshold of an advanced level of proficiency" (back cover). They also spell out in more detail what this level entails.

Upon completion of this book *in sha Allah* you should be able to:

1. With the help of a dictionary, understand the main points of any non-technical text,
2. Carry out basic research: identify important sources and understand main ideas,
3. Use your grammatical skills to identify the meaning of unfamiliar words,
4. Initiate and sustain discussion of topics of general interest,
5. Understand the general ideas of lectures on familiar topics,
6. Be able to write essays and opinion pieces on topics you have studied,
7. Recognize and produce the main grammatical structures of formal Arabic, and
8. Talk about a number of important figures and ideas in Arabic cultural history.
(p. xi)

My interpretation of this is that their description pertains to an *intermediate-high* level of MSA, which is reaching "the threshold of an advanced level of proficiency" (Brustad et al. 1997, back cover). Also, it is important to distinguish between their objective and mine; the difference being that they intend the student to reach that level in all four skills, while my objective was focused on reaching it only in the reading skill.

My Final Level Assessment

Kris and I did a final level assessment of my reading skill at the end of my study program. We used the ACTFL Scales as our guide for describing the levels of reading proficiency of MSA. We decided that I was at the *intermediate-mid* level, entering into the intermediate high level. The following are the ACTFL descriptions of those two levels.

Intermediate-Mid

Able to read consistently with increased understanding simple connected texts dealing with a variety of basic and social needs. Such texts are still linguistically noncomplex and have a clear underlying internal structure. They impart basic information about which the reader has to make minimal suppositions and to which the reader brings personal interest and /or knowledge. Examples may include short, straightforward descriptions of persons, places, and things written for a wide audience.

Intermediate-High

Able to read consistently with full understanding simple connected texts dealing with basic personal and social needs about which the reader has personal interest and /or knowledge. Can get some main ideas and information from texts at the next higher level featuring description and narration. Structural complexity may interfere with comprehension; for example, basic grammatical relations may be misinterpreted and temporal references may rely primarily on lexical items. Has some difficulty with the cohesive factors in discourse, such as matching pronouns with referents. While texts do not differ significantly from those at the Advanced level, comprehension is less consistent. May have to read material several times for understanding.
(ACTFL Inc. 1989, p. 6)

We did not feel justified in claiming that I had completely reached the intermediate-high level. When I have plenty of schemata I experience much of the intermediate-high level of reading MSA. Yet, when dealing with a text in which I have less background knowledge, it is clear that I am still at the intermediate-mid level. It is important to note that Kris and I found it difficult to use these scales in relation to reading MSA, without proper training as ACTFL testers.

The Intermittent Comprehension Exams

When I met with my professional reader, Dr. Michael Gibson, we decided that it would be a good idea for me to have intermittent comprehension exams. The purpose of them was to keep a record of my progress throughout the eight months of my intensive study program. I decided to do them after each book starting with the second book, since I had already started studying it.

I used the most current issue of the Egyptian magazine *Al Ahram Al Arabi* for each of my comprehension exams. I chose this magazine because if seemed to have a good variety of articles about the whole Arab world, as well as, other important international news stories. Many Arabic magazines seemed more nationalistic in their focus and I found that less interesting for me as a reader.

For each of my comprehension exams, I set a time limit of one hour. During that hour, I typically read through a section of the article, two times. The first reading was a quick overview, and the second one was slower with the purpose of understanding more of the details. I wrote down a summary after completing the first reading, and I made more detailed notes, throughout the second reading, about what I thought the text meant.

After I finished the exam, I wrote down observations about the process and about my performance.

I took my self-assessment exams on November 20th, January 13th, March 11th, April 19th, and May 29th.

- For my first comprehension exam, I used an article from *Al Ahram Al Arabi* (Badr Al-Deen 1999, 137:28) about the role of the US in international peace keeping operations and how the United Nations supports the US in this role.

- I used an article from *Al Ahram Al Arabi* (Al Masri, 2000, 145:43) for my second exam. It was about the Palestinians and what they have to look forward to in the new millennium.

- My third comprehension exam was based on an article from *Al Ahram Al Arabi* (Hamdi, and Sharf Al Deen, 2000, 154:26). It was about the influence of the US on the rest of the world through technology, the Internet, satellite television, etc.

- I took my fourth self-assessment exam using an article out of *Al Ahram Al Arabi* (Maklid, 2000, 159:33). The article was about an Egyptian author, Dr. Mostafa Mahmoud, who had written a controversial book that had drawn sharp criticism from the powers-to-be at Al Azhar (the prestigious Muslim Institution of Cairo).

- I used an article from *Al Ahram Al Arabi* (Al Zeen, 2000, 164:58) for my fifth comprehension exam. It was about a traditional storyteller who had recently regained popularity in some of the cafés of Damascus.

In the end, the intermittent comprehension exams did not accomplish the purpose I had hoped they would. However, they did play a slightly modified role, which was

more appropriate to them, considering some of their limitations. This role could be described as a Check-In.

Check-Ins: The Benefits I Received from the Intermittent Comprehension Exams

Throughout the eight months of my study program, I needed systematic check-ins to draw me out of my textbooks, and to give me a sense of how well I could handle articles from a typical Arabic magazine. This type of check-in drew me away, momentarily, from my textbooks and all the support they provided, to attempt to deal with an authentic text without any assistance from vocabulary lists, grammatical explanations, or a dictionary. This provided a type of reality check that helped me adjust my sense of how my learning was steadily contributing to increased proficiency in reading MSA.

Reading authentic texts requires discipline and perseverance by intermediate level students. This is because it is very difficult to find authentic texts that are completely accessible to students at that level. I found that my intermittent comprehension exams forced me to persevere and struggle with texts that were obviously quite beyond my proficiency level. I valued this type of experience and the discipline it demanded from me.

Attempting to do these intermittent comprehension exams was an encouraging experience for me, because it required me to take full responsibility for my learning, as well as, for my assessment. It pressed me into a much more active role of assessing and correcting my own learning. When I have a tutor to depend on, for correcting my work, it is easy for me to become passive related to self-assessment and self-correction.

Requiring myself to do five self-assessment exams, throughout my study program, pressed me into a deeper experience of self-assessment than I have experienced before.

The Inadequacies of the Intermittent Comprehension Exams

The intermittent exams were based on the assumption that Kris and I were going to be able to choose 5 different articles, which were of the same level of difficulty. As it turned out, this was very difficult to do. The articles we chose ended up being quite varied in their levels of difficulty, as well as, in the accessibility of their vocabulary and grammar. This was despite the fact that we were trying to choose articles that were of equal difficulty and of equal accessibility. Choosing these types of articles requires a skilled examiner who has a superior level in reading MSA. This was one need that we could not meet ourselves.

I was not able to assess my performance with certainty, because I was not able to efficiently deal with much of the more difficult grammar and less frequent vocabulary in the articles. I was able to make intelligent guesses and build my own hypothesis about the meaning of each article, but I could not confidently assess my level of proficiency based out of my ability to comprehend the articles. I could not adequately correct the exams, because that required someone with a superior level of proficiency. Had I been able to work with articles that were primarily of the intermediate level in difficulty, I could have corrected them with somewhat more certainty, with the help of a dictionary and some grammar reference books. In summary, then, choosing appropriate articles and correcting the exams were tasks, which required a qualified examiner with a superior level of proficiency.

Intermediate-Mid Moving into Intermediate-High

What I need in order to feel confident that I am at the *intermediate-high* level in reading MSA, is to solidify my vocabulary base and my grammar. I have an adequate base in both of them to consider myself *intermediate-high*. However, there are inconsistencies, a lack of firmness and reliability, which cause me to return to assessing my level of proficiency as *intermediate-mid*. I need more time reading and studying in order to solidify both of these areas. Then, my foundation will be adequate to support me at the intermediate-high level, and in turn, I will "reach the threshold of an advanced level of proficiency" (Brustad, Al-Batal, and Al-Tonsi, 1997, back cover) in reading MSA.

CHAPTER NINE

FINAL ASSESSMENT EXAMS

Organizing my final assessment exam was a process that stretched out throughout this year of my research project. Professor Khalek was able to do my initial level assessment, in September 1999, but was not available to do my final assessment exam in July 2000. Finally, in June, I was put in contact with Dr. Roger Allen, of the University of Pennsylvania, who has been the national trainer of testers in Arabic (the Oral Proficiency Interview procedure) for ACTFL since 1986. He is also a certified tester of MSA.

Dr. Allen answered an Internet request, which was posted in an Arabic professors' discussion list, ARABIC-L, by my professional reader, Dr. Gibson. He graciously agreed to do my assessment during our brief visit to Philadelphia, in July. Dr. Allen is a professor of Arabic literature, who has had a long history of involvement with the development of the ACTFL Scales for MSA, as well as, in using them as an assessment tool. He chaired the committee that composed the Arabic-specific guidelines for ACTFL, published in *Foreign Language Annals* (1989, 22:4). This was a very encouraging development for Kris and me, since we had used the ACTFL Scales to the best of our abilities in assessing my beginning and ending proficiency levels, yet we wanted some confirmation on how well we had used them.

The Examination Procedure

As it turned out, there is no official ACTFL testing procedure for the reading skill of MSA. There is only the Oral Proficiency Interview. However, Dr. Allen had his own series of eleven mini-exams meant to assess one's reading proficiency level from novice

to superior. Each exam consisted of text on one page and four to six questions on the next page. The questions were a combination of multiple-choice and short answer questions. He asked me to begin with the first exam and do as many of them as I was able to do.

In two hours I had finished seven of the exams in the series. I asked him if he wanted me to continue on with the next exam or if he thought he had enough data to make an assessment of my level. He asked me to take a few more minutes to see what I could do with Exam #8, which was an advanced level text. After fifteen minutes, he returned and I told him that I had concentrated on the questions of the interview and the introductory summary, yet, I needed more time to really be able to deal with the questions with any degree of confidence. He concluded that he had enough data to do the assessment and that I could stop at that point in the exam-series.

Dr. Allen's Assessment

Dr. Allen assessed my proficiency level of reading MSA as *intermediate-mid*. He went on to explain what my performance on his mini-exam series showed him about my proficiency level.

> You show strong signs of intermediate-high (i.e. glimmerings of the next major level, *advanced*), but there were sufficient questions about your control of basic features of that level to place you in the *mid* category.
> In a word, it would not require a great deal of time and experience before you would be characterized as *intermediate-high* (as a prelude to crossing the threshold to advanced). In that process, of course, vocabulary enrichment will/would play, a large part, implying a lot more reading!
> (Allen, 2000, July 19)

My Conclusion

I was very encouraged when I received Dr. Allen's assessment of my proficiency level of reading MSA. It was clear confirmation that Kris and I had accurately assessed

my reading level with the ACTFL Scales. We had realized that I was regularly experiencing the *intermediate-high* proficiency level and even occasionally the *advanced* level, but certain inconsistencies in my grammatical and vocabulary bases confirmed that I was still at the *intermediate-mid* level. I felt privileged to have been able to have a final proficiency assessment under the supervision of someone as qualified and experienced as Dr. Allen.

CHAPTER TEN

MY CONCLUSIONS

Yes, I definitely experienced rising off the plateau in studying Arabic during this research project. And as I reflected on those experiences, I was drawn to contemplate how to best move on in studying MSA. How should I consolidate what I have learned? How could I then decide to go beyond the level that I have reached to my next level of proficiency? In order to do that, I have carefully analyzed these past months of my study program. This has enabled me to draw conclusions about what went well and what needed to be modified. As a result, I have a solid basis from which to consider how to adjust my approach to studying MSA for the future.

Rising off the Plateau

Rising off the plateau was an experience that I had throughout the eight months of my study program. I experienced regular momentum in learning MSA as I have never experienced it before. I was able to consolidate much of the MSA that I had studied over the years and then expanded on it. Even though I can not claim to have reached "the threshold of an advanced level of proficiency" (Brustad, Al-Batal, and Al-Tonsi, 1997, back cover), I am satisfied that I progressed as far as possible towards that goal, for the present time. The following points summarize the results of my experience of rising off the plateau in studying MSA:

- I am now able to get the gist of most non-technical texts.
- I have a solid grasp of MSA grammar.
- I have a good vocabulary base.
- I have comfortably reached the intermediate-mid level of proficiency in reading MSA.
- I am comfortable using an Arabic (no English) verb conjugation book.

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Rising off the plateau in studying Arabic was partially the result of learning about myself as an LL2 and about the SLA process. I learned a lot about these subjects from many of my classes at SIT. The knowledge and awareness I gained from my readings, lectures, and group projects, were the source of inspiration I needed to prepare me for this thesis project. Without them, I would not have been able to conceive of and in turn implement this research project. So, it is clear to me that this experience of rising off the plateau in studying Arabic, has drawn deeply from what I learned over the past two years, during my MAT program at SIT.

The Reading Skill Approach

Prioritizing the reading skill was an effective approach for me as an LL2. It definitely built momentum for me and provided opportunities, which reinforced my vocabulary memorization through selected reading texts. Each of the textbooks that I studied this year prioritized recycling vocabulary. The reading texts purposefully included the vocabulary, which had been introduced in the previous unit, while introducing other forms derived from the same root. Reading these forms of the vocabulary, which I was memorizing, over and over in the texts, reinforced my memorization process.

Prioritizing the reading skill also encouraged me to analyze the grammatical structure of MSA. While listening to spoken MSA, I am usually trying to decide how some of the vocabulary is spelled. I do this in order to decide if I know the root and can derive the meaning of the word according to its grammatical form. While reading MSA, I am able to immediately know the spelling of the vocabulary, as well as which

grammatical form it represents. Reading MSA is the quickest and surest way for me to study its grammatical structure.

My reading skill focus definitely supported me in rising off the plateau in studying MSA. Yet, in order for me to consolidate and solidify what I have learned so far, I need to begin to include the other three skills in my approach to studying MSA. I still will want to prioritize the reading skill in the future, but I will also need to begin to bring up the proficiency of my other three skills. Ideally, I will continue to forge ahead with the reading skill but not exclusively as during these past eight months.

Initially, I would like to concentrate on grammar, alongside vocabulary review and rereading the texts I have studied this past year. This desire is based out of the fresh appreciation for grammar that I gained this year. My conviction is that the Brustad, Al-Batal, and Al-Tonsi textbook enabled me to effectively learn and use MSA grammar within the contexts of the needs of each unit. Their presentation of the grammar points was clear, as well as, helpfully applied to the reading texts. I experienced increasing comfort with MSA grammar and became more aware of the role that grammar plays in creating meaning. These experiences whet my appetite to go deeper with MSA grammar.

Concerning studying all four skills of MSA, I would like to use the series produced by Brustad, Al-Batal, and Al-Tonsi, including the videocassettes and audiocassettes. This series would give me the opportunity to raise the proficiency of the other three skills while consolidating and going deeper in reading the texts, which I studied this year. Whenever I find my momentum dissipating, I can shift back to the reading skill to use my most productive means of learning to prevent the process from stalling.

I should study all four skills because of how they naturally consolidate and reinforce the language I am learning. The priority for me will be to find the balance between raising the proficiency of the other three skills, while continuing to move on with the reading skill. I foresee that this will be an area of healthy tension, which I will need to manage in order to maximize my learning opportunities.

Tutor/Teacher Supervision

During this research project, I used my textbooks and their authors as my teachers. That was very efficient and allowed me to concentrate on the explanations that they felt were needed for the material of each unit. I usually ignored other questions that came to me, unless they were related to the language and grammar being covered in the unit I was studying. If necessary, I referred to other MSA reference materials that I own.

A weakness of my system was the lack of feedback and correction for my exercises and assessment exams. It would clearly have been desirable to have had a weekly session with an Arabic professor, who could have corrected my exercises and answered my questions. So, why did I choose not to have one?

While studying at CITRAF, I was basically the manager of my study program and my instructors. I was the one who decided what I wanted to study and how I wanted to study it. I was also the full-time student who was responsible to learn as much as I could. During that experience, I found it difficult to be the program supervisor as well as the full-time student. I found that I could do neither of the roles well. Trying to train and manage a teacher, while studying full-time, is the type of language learning situation that quickly tires me out. It was one of my main reasons for deciding against using a tutor during this research project. I could clearly see the potential benefits of having a tutor,

but I could also see the possible complications that could distract me from the primary task of my research project, which was to rise off the plateau in MSA. Here are some of the potential benefits and complications of having a tutor:

Potential benefits of having a tutor

- I would be able to have my weekly exercises checked and corrected.
- I would have a qualified instructor who would be able to assess my comprehension of my *intermittent comprehension exams*.
- I would have someone to ask my weekly questions.

Potential complications of having a tutor

- In the past I have had difficulty negotiating an acceptable tutorial situation with qualified instructors, because they do not want to be paid for the service but would prefer to have an exchange of Arabic for English. This typically ends up with me giving up some of the time that I need for my MSA studies.
- Having a tutor would mean having a relationship. I enjoy having relationships with Tunisians, but in order to focus on the reading skill of MSA I would have to place time limits on outside activities, as well as relationships, during this research project period. Studying spoken Arabic, intensively, requires a lot of time spent in relationships. Studying reading MSA requires the opposite. It means many hours spent interacting with texts. Would the time required for a tutorial relationship, within the norms of this culture, enhance or detract from my ability to focus on reading MSA? Would the amount of benefit received from the corrections and assessments be worth the time required for the tutorial relationship?

Ideally, I would have preferred having a tutor for my research project. It would have been an asset to the process of my study program. In the end, I chose not to because it seemed too complicated for me to organize efficiently, and there seemed to be no guarantees that it would turn out to be what I really needed. Because of this choice I had to go without someone to correct and assess me throughout my study program. Instead, I delegated that aspect of the process to the final level assessment exams.

For my future study program, I would want to include the assistance of Arabic professors. Since I would be adjusting my focus to include all four skills, I would need more opportunities to interact with colleagues, orally, about MSA. I am not sure that I

would need to pay someone weekly for this type of service. It may make more sense to just interact with colleagues at work, and ask different ones questions that I have each week. This would be more socially appropriate than to try to hire one of them. I do not think they would mind doing small favors such as those listed below:

- glancing at an article and checking my comprehension of its introductory summary
- reading a letter I had written in MSA and correcting a few errors
- assessing my comprehension of a school written announcement
- checking my understanding of a phone bill
- listening to my reading of a poem by Abu Al Qasim Ash Shabbi (a famous Tunisian poet)

In the future, interacting orally with colleagues will be a high priority for me, as I focus on all four skills. This will change the dynamics of my needs regarding studying MSA. Instead of trying to guard against too much time spent in relationships, I will be prioritizing them and allowing them to play an integral role in my MSA studies.

Analyzing Myself and the Process

This research project required me to regularly evaluate my studies, my SLA process, and myself as an LL2. I do not naturally do this type of systematic assessment. My natural tendency is to do it haphazardly, at best. Often times, I get into a comfortable routine with my L2 study, and then, I just continue in that pattern until I get tired of it. This is not the most effective way to study my L2. It could easily be enhanced, with a minimum of effort, through regular self-assessments and assessments involving a friend or tutor. Becoming convinced of this was an important breakthrough for me.

Leaving My Plateau

I finished this experience with the quiet assurance that I have attained the tools, skills, strategies, successful experiences, etc. which I needed in order to continue on towards attaining a level of proficiency in MSA. Confidence comes through

experiencing success as an LL2, and then in turn, through being able to reproduce that success at the next stage of learning. It is OK to plateau as an LL2 if that is one's choice. But, to plateau in an L2 from a lack of knowing what to do next is a disheartening experience. I am confident that I have left my old, familiar plateau in MSA never to return to it again.

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